

Charles Bolden, NASA Administrator

University of South Carolina Commencement

Columbia, South Carolina

May 10, 2014

Thank you, President Pastides. I want to also acknowledge Chairman Gene Warr and the USC Board of Trustees; Provost Michael Amiridis; the faculty and staff of the university; and of course the members and graduates of the USC Class of 2014. Thank you all for giving me this opportunity to come back home to share this milestone occasion with you.

My congratulations also to the Honorary Degree recipients, Drs. Anita Zucker and Mac Arnold. Welcome to the USC family! I was honored to share your experience in 1984 and I can tell you there are few things in life as precious as the recognition you are receiving today.

Growing up here in Columbia, I was so blessed to have a set of parents, Charles and Ethel Bolden, who cared for my brother, Warren, and me, loved us and taught us to be passionate about life. I stand here today because of the sacrifices they made for me and because they believed in me and told me that I could do anything I wanted to do if I was willing to work hard and fight for it. So before I go any further, I want to ask this graduating class to join me in (once again) showing our appreciation for a very special part of the University of South Carolina family -- the parents who cared for you and got you here; your family members and friends who have stood by you, supported you and traveled near and far to be with you today. None of us would be here today without them. Let's give them a big round of applause.

This is a big weekend here at USC. Not only did you get a visit from Vice President Joe Biden yesterday...not only did the Chairman and CEO of the Boeing Company, James McNerney, deliver a commencement address earlier today...

But on Thursday, USC's own, Jadeveon Clowney was the number one overall number pick in the NFL draft. Way to go Jadeveon. Way to go Fighting Gamecocks!

But for me, and I am sure for all of you, this moment – right here, right now -- stands as the highlight of this week, this year and perhaps of your young lives.

After many long days and nights of studying, cramming and maybe a little partying, today you will walk out of here with a coveted USC college degree. That is a remarkable achievement and a great way to launch a new beginning.

It's this achievement about which I want to spend a few moments of reflection with you this afternoon. I want you all to think about the incredible opportunity you have as graduates of this great university to build lives of purpose and meaning for yourselves, your families and communities and our nation.

You are part of a growing recognition that the future of our nation depends on continuing to unlock doors of opportunity so that more of our people have a chance to follow and realize their dreams. *As we rebuild from the Great Recession, each of you can help rebuild an America that provides opportunity for all - an America with an immigration system that works; an America that takes care of its most vulnerable and rewards hard work; an America that leads the world on climate change. As you think about what you'll do with your time and talent, I hope some of you consider public service - to make ours a nation that provides these opportunities to all Americans, to make ours a more perfect union.* That is the path that brought me all the way from Columbia's C.A. Johnson High School, around the world, literally out of this world and back again to be with you today.

I know that this year you are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of the University of South Carolina. In a few months, we will also celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination and segregation based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Needless to say, Carolina has come a long way in the half-century since Robert Anderson, Henrie Monteith Treadwell and James Solomon, Jr. took their first heroic steps through the doors of the Osborne Administration Building.

America has come a long way too! My presence here is one small example. A larger example is my boss, President Barack Obama. Fifty years ago, it was unthinkable that America would ever have a Black President. In fact, back in my childhood days, if you had asked someone in my community what are the chances of seeing a Black man in the Oval Office, they'd have probably replied, "as likely as seeing a man on the moon."

So much for conventional wisdom. Just as in the worlds of technology, aeronautics and space exploration, science fiction has become science fact...in the worlds of business, academia and the highest echelons of government; an impossible dream has become a living reality.

We still have work to do, but the simple truth is America's diversity is our greatest strength. We are going to need the talents, ideas and leadership of each and every citizen and each and every one of you if we are going to ensure that America and its people realize their full potential and continue to lead in the 21st century global economy, so dream big dreams and follow your passions in choosing your future paths.

One of the ways NASA is living out our vision here in South Carolina is through the significant investments we are making in large and small businesses throughout this state that are helping us build the aerospace industry of the future.

We are also proud to be working alongside USC to strengthen and expand the study of science, technology, engineering and math – the STEM disciplines – both for the students on this campus and the middle and high school students who will be taking your place in the classroom in the coming years. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that every child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or background, has an equal chance to pursue and succeed in these fields.

As part of that commitment, we have formed a unique partnership with USC and 14 other South Carolina colleges that are part of NASA's South Carolina Space Grant Consortium.

The Consortium is devoted to encouraging more South Carolina students, including women and minorities, to understand and participate in NASA's missions and ultimately pursue careers in the aerospace industry.

I want to take a moment to especially applaud the research, education and community outreach mission of USC's new McNair Center for Aerospace Innovation and Research. You have become a national leader in a few short years.

One of the great blessings of my life was the friendship I shared with the late Dr. Ronald McNair of Lake City, who in 1984 became the second African American to fly in space.

STEM education was a passion Ron and I shared as friends, colleagues, and fellow astronauts. I remember Ron as a man who couldn't get enough of science, math and technology. Though we both experienced hardship growing up here in segregated South Carolina, Ron inspired me and many others as he overcame tremendous obstacles to earn a PhD from MIT, become a noted physicist, a highly accomplished jazz saxophonist, a fifth-degree black belt in karate, and a trailblazing African American astronaut.

It was Ron who encouraged me to follow in his footsteps and apply to become an astronaut when we met during my time as a test pilot in Patuxent River, MD. Unfortunately, he lost his life during the Space Shuttle *Challenger* accident in 1986. But his legacy lives on through the McNair Center here at USC and through the Ron McNair Scholars program, which is giving thousands of low-income, first-generation college students, and minorities across the country the chance to pursue post baccalaureate degrees and follow their dreams.

As Ron said during his acceptance remarks when he and I were honored with honorary degrees here at USC's 1984 commencement, "*The road between South Carolina and space flight is not a very simple one, nor one filled with guarantees. In fact, the only guarantees to be found are those that reside in the unchallenged depths of one's own determination.*"

We meet those challenges every day at NASA where our vision is “...to reach for new heights and reveal the unknown so that what we do and learn will benefit all humankind”. That is a vision that challenges all of us.

In my travels across the country and around the world, I find that students everywhere are excited about exploring the unknown and creating a better world. They are fired up about what lies ahead, for the chance to develop capabilities that don't exist today. They want to be a part of something larger than themselves and they want to leave this world better than they found it. I know you share that vision.

Class of 2014, you are graduating at a pivotal moment in human history. You are the generation that will find cures for once incurable diseases. You are the ones who may solve the problems associated with climate change and you may finally teach how to live as one people on this planet.

You or your children may be among the first humans to travel to an asteroid or walk on the surface of Mars. But no matter what passion or profession you pursue, I urge you to always lean on the knowledge, the values and the spirit of USC.

My daughter is a plastic surgeon and my son a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. My wife and I have always given them this advice: *dream big dreams; do what you want to do; don't listen to anyone who tells you can't do something or you don't belong; do your job and do it very well; and don't let the opportunity to make a difference in your world pass you by. Be passionate about life and its tremendous gifts!*

Let me offer just a few parting thoughts:

- *Don't take yourselves too seriously.*
- *Take care of yourselves physically, mentally and spiritually.*
- *If you choose to start a family, love and care for them every single day as your family has loved and cared for you.*

- Don't let a day pass that you don't approach someone who means a lot to you and thank them for just being themselves and for helping you be you.

- The first job you accept out of Carolina may not turn out to be all you expected, so have the courage to change your mind and continue to seek work about which you are passionate – work that will allow you to make a difference in the lives of those around you.

Class of 2014, I can't tell you with certainty how things will look in ten years, but I expect that many of you will help lead us to a better world. Not just more prosperous...but filled with more fairness, opportunity, freedom, creativity and love. It's been said, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it", so get out there and go for it! That is our mission and this is your moment.

God bless you and God Bless the good ole US of A.

Go Gamecocks!